

## May 22, 2009 - Official Tries to Reassure Lawmakers About Cost Hikes, Timetable

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### Official Tries to Reassure Lawmakers About Cost Hikes, Timetable

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The Navy official in charge of the Walter  
Reed Army  
Medical Center

consolidation tried to assure lawmakers yesterday that the project was on schedule and that cost increases were the unavoidable result of an increased focus on providing care for wounded warriors coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan.

But Vice Adm. John M. Mateczun's comments in a House subcommittee hearing were met with skepticism by powerful Reps. John P. Murtha (D-Pa.) and James P. Moran Jr. (D-Va.), who said there was no comprehensive plan in place, no clear sense of how much the project would cost and great uncertainty that the 2011 deadline would be met.

"If our highest priority is the care of our patients, we are going to fall short," Moran said. "You're going right up against the deadline, and there's no Plan B."

Under the Pentagon's 2005 Base Realignment and Closure plan, Walter Reed is to shut down by Sept. 15, 2011, and merge with the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda and Fort Belvoir in Fairfax County. The Bethesda campus will be renamed the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, and Fort Belvoir would get a new 120-bed hospital, which is under construction.

The move, as Mateczun has said, is "the largest infrastructure investment that has ever been made in military medicine."

News reports detailing poor conditions and bureaucratic nightmares at Walter Reed led to significant changes in the treatment of service members wounded in combat and in the consolidation plans, officials said. As a result, the initial budget of \$800 million jumped to \$2.4 billion.

After the scandal broke, costs to better accommodate the wounded increased by \$1.1 billion, Rick Bond, the deputy director of the joint task force set up to oversee the hospitals, said after the hearing. A warrior-care unit with 50 intensive-care beds was added to the plans, as were dedicated clinic space and private rooms.

The timeline of the project was pushed up to ease the transition, which also raised the cost. The initial plan used outdated pricing projections and underestimated the staffing the new Bethesda campus would require -- and thus the need for office space and parking, Bond said.

"The fundamental project has changed since it was originally conceived," he said.

He said it would be completed on time, "given what we know about the construction schedule today." But, he said, "a lot can happen in the next two years."

During the hearing, Moran was somewhat sympathetic given the massive scope of the project, calling it "an impossible mission." Still, he said, "we don't want to be told at the eleventh hour: 'You have to give us all this money, or it can't be done.' "

Murtha, who opposed the closing of Walter Reed, said that the congressionally mandated deadline was nearing and that Congress didn't have a sense of how much it was going to cost.

"We get inadequate figures, and then the taxpayer has to pay," he said.